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ABSTRACT

The discipline of philosophical counseling is a relatively young field. The nature of philosophical counseling, and the search for wisdom on which it is based, is explored here. Philosophical counseling is a process, based on philosophizing, in which the counselor aids the counselee in a personal journey directed at education and wisdom. Such a search for wisdom is particularly important as traditional frameworks of values and meanings are collapsing, a condition which is usually associated with the postmodern world. Philosophical counseling, therefore, in its search for wisdom, is fundamentally different from traditional forms of psychotherapy. While other techniques of psychotherapy focus on uncovering and modifying psychic elements in the person, philosophical counseling focuses on the encounter between the person and the realities that extend beyond him or her, a search for the foundations of human reality which are manifested through explorations of networks of basic ideas. Such an approach avoids society's tendency to overemphasize the psychological perspective to the neglect of other perspectives, allowing a person to rise beyond self-centered concerns and specific interests. A case study is presented to illustrate how philosophical counseling can be used in a therapy session. (RJM)

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PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELING AND THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Aug. 1996.

Abstract

This paper attempts to characterize the nature of philosophical counseling and of the search for wisdom on which it is based. It describes philosophical counseling as a process, based on philosophizing, in which the counselor aids the counselee in a personal journey directed at edification and wisdom. Such a search for wisdom is particularly important in our present age, in which traditional frameworks of values and meanings are collapsing. Philosophical counseling as a search for wisdom is fundamentally different from traditional forms of psychotherapy. While the latter are focused on uncovering and modifying psychic elements in the person, philosophical counseling is focused on the encounter between the person and realities that extends beyond him or her, namely the foundations of our human reality which are manifested through explorations of networks of basic ideas. This process is illustrated through a case study.

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PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELING AND THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM

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The use of philosophy for counseling, directing, and enriching everyday life can already be found at the very beginning of western philosophy, in the 6th century B.C. in ancient Greece. The philosophies of the Pythagoreans, the Stoics, the Cynics, and in later periods—various religious philosophies, philosophies of the Renaissance, Romanticism, Communism and Socialism, Existentialism, Feminism, and many others, were used to help individuals to understand themselves, enrich their lives, and deal with their personal problems.

However, philosophical counseling as a specific discipline is a relatively young field. It was born in 1981 in Germany, and from there spread to other countries, such as Holland, Israel, South Africa, France, UK, Canada and the USA. There are now several hundreds of people involved in the field in various degrees, and several national organizations, some of which publish newsletters or journals. The field is obviously growing and expanding. But what is it all about? Is it just another one of the many hundreds of approaches to therapy and counseling that appear every few months?

In this paper I will suggest that the answer is negative. Philosophical counseling is based on a unique subject matter and goal that are fundamentally different from those of psychologically-oriented therapies. It is aimed at, what the original meaning of the word "philosophy" means in Greek, philo-sophia: love of wisdom. This age-old goal of wisdom has been almost forgotten in our technological, comfort-seeking, self-centered age. It is the goal of philosophical counseling, as I see it, to remind us of this important aim. Philosophical counseling is a personal journey in the world of ideas, aimed at wisdom.

A general characterization of philosophical counseling

Perhaps the most salient characteristic that is common to all forms of philosophical counseling is that, unlike in most psychotherapies, the counseling session focuses on philosophizing between

the counselor and counselee. The point is not that the counselor approaches the counselee with a certain philosophical view, as for example existential psychotherapists work from the perspective of existentialist philosophy, but that an open philosophical dialogue is what actually takes place within the counseling session.

In order to say anything more specific, it would be necessary to distinguish between different types of philosophical counseling. Like most other disciplines, philosophical counseling does not comprise one single unitary approach. For this reason, what I will say of philosophical counseling will apply primarily to the approach which I have been developing in the past several years.

The need for wisdom

The life of the individual in contemporary western culture is, to a very large extent, devoid of what can be called wisdom and spirituality. By these notions, as well as related ones such as those of depth, meaningfulness, or edification, I mean various ways in which the person opens himself up towards a personal encounter with the endless horizons of meanings that are interwoven in human reality. Wisdom and spirituality require that I go beyond my narrow self and the prison of my preconceptions and attitudes; beyond my particular opinions and desires to which I am tempted to cling; and beyond everything which I tend to take as incontestable, already settled, a finished matter of fact. The inability to go beyond all this, or in other words—the sinking into one's fixed and already-settled attitudes, opinions, ideals, desires, etc.—imprisons the individual in a petrified and narrow world, and manifests itself as emptiness and meaninglessness. These are so pervasive nowadays that many take them for granted as natural parts of life, hardly ever striving for anything more than sustaining their current way of being through personal gratification, security, comfort, or material gain. In this sense we live in a time of crisis, a period in which human existence is losing its dimension of depth, wisdom, and spirituality and is becoming more and more shallow, self-absorbed and one-dimensional.

Ironically, this is happening precisely in an era in which science and technology have been making amazing progress. In fact, we live in the midst of a scientific-technological explosion which supplies us with unprecedented means of communication, transportation, medicine, education and entertainment. One could have expected that these developments would open new

horizons for the human spirit; that modern technology would allow the person more time for spiritual development; that accessibility to information, books, and personal computers would enable people to broaden and deepen their intellectual horizons; that television, telephone and other means of communication between cultures would contribute to our cultural richness. But the result of this scientific-technological explosion is precisely the opposite. Instead of opening in the person new spaces for going beyond trivialities into inner fullness, deepened reflection, cultural richness—life has become erratic, quick, superficial, dependent on external stimuli, focused on immediate self-gratification, alien to itself and at the same time absorbed in itself. Today's world appears to offer us much freedom, but the choices which occupy most people's minds are typically no greater than whether to go to this or that restaurant, to consume this or that type of vitamin, or buy this or that new pair of shoes. The average individual's greatest dream is hardly loftier than buying a new shiny car or advancing to the next rank in the workplace. Life is imprisoned in the trivialities of commercials and television movies which impose their inane standards of how one should dress, what ought to be said, what one should aspire to, which jobs are respectable, and which opinions are "in."

In a certain sense, this is not a novel condition. In all historical periods, the majority of human beings were occupied with their own little concerns. Deeper spirituality or culture has always been the lot of only few. Nevertheless, there is an important difference between our present age and previous periods. In previous historical periods there always existed a dimension of spirituality and wisdom at least as a possibility—even if most people had scarcely utilized it. Even in periods in which much of humanity was sunk in great decadence, there still was a space, on the conceptual maps of the time, for edification and spiritual richness. It was still existing as an option even if rarely realized, it was part of the landscape of the world. Today, in contrast, the dimensions of wisdom, depth, spirituality have been largely forgotten by most parts of western civilization, even by the intellectual sections of society, and in this sense they are evaporating out of existence, even as a mere possibility.

This world which I am describing and in which we live is commonly called "post-modernity." Much has been written about the postmodern world and worldview, and I will not be able to explore in this short presentation how its basic characteristics are related to the

disappearance of wisdom. Suffice it to say that it contains a spiritual crisis, and as such that it poses a fundamental challenge to contemporary humanity.

I suggest that the role of philosophical counseling is to take part in the effort to address this human situation. Philosophy as a search for wisdom is a search for broadening and deepening life. Its role is not to help counselees be more satisfied, but wiser; not to overcome problems in their workplace or in their marriage, but to explore the domains of ideas and grow towards wisdom. To be sure, wisdom is likely to empower a person to overcome personal problems, but this is not its primary goal.

Philosophical counseling and psychotherapy

How, then, is philosophical counseling to serve as a search for wisdom? It would be helpful to explain this point by comparing philosophical counseling to psychotherapies.

It is impossible to give a general definition that would precisely capture the many hundreds of different psychotherapies that exist today. But I believe that most of them would roughly fit into the following characterization: Psychotherapies focus on that which occurs to, or in, the person or persons in question. Their primary concern is to understand and/or modify (usually both) those conditions which the persons in question undergo—whether experiential, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, etc.

In contrast to psychotherapies thus characterized, philosophical counseling, as I see it, does not focus on occurrences in the person. Philosophy as a search for wisdom is a journey beyond the person. To see what I have in mind here, the following analogy may be helpful. Consider, for example, the familiar case of a person who for many years feels emptiness and boredom, until at last a deep change occurs when she encounters something that touches her deeply; perhaps she joins some social cause, converts to a certain religion, starts painting, etc. She now finds a new source of vitality and meaningfulness. Let us assume that the person is not simply deceiving herself by her new occupation but is really moved and grasped by it. What is interesting in such cases is that the previously dissatisfied person now expands herself not by digging into the land on which she is standing but by journeying to other domains of life in which she has never been; not by focusing on her actual emptiness and analyzing her particular life, but by going beyond it, in

fact by going beyond herself, overcoming herself. The material that had been inside her had not been sufficient for a meaningful life. Meaningfulness required in this case—and I believe that this so in the vast majority of human lives—encounters with realities outside the person.

In a similar manner, philosophical counseling has the potential of helping the counselee not just to understand her actual particular condition, but to go beyond her present horizons. As we just saw, this can be done in many ways and fields such as social activism and painting, not only through philosophy. But what is special about philosophy is that it leads the person to an encounter not just with this or that aspect of our world, but with the very ground of being, the foundation of our lives. The role of philosophy in philosophical counseling is to open up the counselee to the all-encompassing horizons of meanings that constitute our reality, which is to say, to wisdom. To put it dramatically, in terms of Plato's famous cave metaphor about us people who live in a dark cave and can see only shadows, the point of philosophy should not be to help those cave-dwellers explore the shadows among which they live, but rather to help them leave the cave to the greater light of the outside world.

Seen in this way, undergoing philosophical counseling is more akin to studying art than to undergoing psychotherapy. Like the study of art, philosophical counseling involves encountering novel contents outside one's present self. While studying art one learns the rules of perspective, the aesthetics of art, how to lay paint on the canvas, etc. Similarly, in philosophical counseling, one encounters new ideas which disclose new aspects of human existence and which are not in the individual's psyche in any reasonable sense. It is a journey to a realm which extends far beyond what is already manifested in the person's life.

The vision that I am ascribing here to philosophical counseling can be found, in various forms, in most human cultures and in most historical periods. It is the vision that the good life does not mean merely functioning properly (emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally, etc.), nor merely enjoying oneself. A fuller life involves the edification of the spirit and the understanding.

I should emphasize that the edification envisioned in philosophical counseling cannot possibly follow some particular theory about life. Talking about philosophical counseling in accordance with, say, Plato or Sartre would be a contradiction in terms. The search for wisdom, by its very essence, is not confined to one single picture of reality but is rather a dialogue with the

infinite network of ideas and perspectives that are woven into the realm of potential ways of being. Furthermore, it is a personal journey which draws its life not from a single doctrine but from the individual's unique experiences and dialogue with human reality. At the same time, it is important to realize that such a journey may utilize materials, such as concepts and ideas, borrowed from traditional philosophies. Indeed, it would be superficial and pretentious for a person not to take into consideration already existing discussions about life, as though he is the first person in history to search for wisdom, and as though the landscape of ideas has never been explored before.

The problem of psychologization

My remarks so far should in no way be seen as a criticism of psychology. Psychotherapeutic approaches may be useful when taken as one among other perspectives on life, and when they do so, they play an important role in helping individuals to cope with their personal problems.

What I am criticizing is, rather, our culture's tendency to over-emphasize the psychological perspective to the neglect of other perspectives, and thus to forget the age-old goals of wisdom and spiritual edification. This trend of "psychologization" or "psychological imperialism" is the tendency to regard all aspects of living as capable of being understood psychologically. This includes existential issues, that is, questions about how I should make my life worthwhile, full, meaningful, growing with wisdom. Presumably, if one wishes to be helped in these matters, then the psychotherapist is the proper address.

This is a terrible distortion of the meaning of basic life-issues. It is as though the therapist already has a ready-made answer to the profound philosophical issue of what counts as a meaningful and worthwhile life, so that all that is needed is to direct the patient in the right way. And indeed, quite a few therapists aim in their work, often implicitly, towards certain specific values, such as independence and self-reliance, self-confidence, productivity, assertiveness, etc. The assumption is that this is what life should be like. To realize that these values are highly questionable, and at the very least require critical philosophical inquiry, it is enough to see that each and every one of them is seen as unacceptable and even abhorrent in some societies which are not ruled by the individualistic, self-centered, achievement-oriented ideology of the contemporary West.

There are, however, many other therapists who realize that they do not have ready-made answers to basic life-questions, and resist sneaking them implicitly into their work. Among those, many try to leave the answers in the hands of the patient herself. But here lies a no lesser danger of distorting the nature of life-issues. For it seems that this approach assumes that replies to life's deepest questions are a matter of personal taste. It confuses the realization that there are no universal answers that are true for everybody, with the misguided idea that anything goes and that these questions are to be settled by the sheer power of arbitrary personal decision or blind feelings and nothing more. It fails to realize that it is precisely because those question do not have a final and universal answer, that they require a profound investigation—probably a never-ending one. By comparison, the fact that there is no universal criterion for how paintings should be painted does not mean that anything goes and that artists should not bother to study art. It is precisely because there is no one universal and final answer as to how to paint that a serious artist must go on a never-ending but ever-deepening personal journey and delve—not into the world of psychology, but into the world of art and artistic meanings. In a similar way, philosophical counseling helps the counselee to delve into the fundamental reality disclosed through ideas in a journey which, though will not yield a final universal solution, nevertheless—and in fact precisely for that reason—is the way of wisdom and edification.

All this is to say that basic life-issues cannot be addressed by psychological means, as is so commonly thought in our society, but by philosophical ones (and perhaps others, e.g., religious), that is, through a search in the landscape disclosed by ideas. The proper attitude of the psychotherapist is neither to answer them by herself for the patient, nor to encourage the patient to answer them in accordance with her personal taste or inner feelings, but to encourage her to embark on a philosophical self-investigation towards wisdom, something that lies outside the field of psychotherapy.

The search for wisdom

This philosophical self-investigation is a process in which the person rises beyond her self-centered concerns and specific interests and opens herself to the endless horizons of potential

understandings of the ground of our being. It is a dialogue with the infinite network of ideas that are interwoven into life and intimate to us the fabric of its basic reality.

It is here that we can see the role of philosophical counseling in the search for wisdom. The subject matter of philosophy is to unfold the ideational foundation of our world: the various meanings, implications, and interconnections concerning the concepts of freedom or the self, the moral implications of guilt, the worthwhileness or worthlessness of success, and indeed the meaning of truth and wisdom. Notice, it deals not with psychological events and processes such as feelings of guilt and desires for freedom, but rather with the concept of guilt and the idea of the value freedom. Feelings and desires are indeed the subject matter of psychology which may study their etiology, behavioral manifestation, etc.; but the world of ideas is the domain of philosophical investigation. To be sure, to some extent all disciplines can be seen as exploring concepts or ideas, but it is the task of philosophy to explore the most basic ideas which underlie our lives, the very foundation of our reality.

A case study

How is this lofty vision to be applied to concrete life, particularly to one-hour sessions with counselees? Naturally, the road from this general and abstract vision to concrete practice is long, and involves many theoretical, methodological and philosophical steps. Due to time limitations, let me make a dramatic leap to the end of this road, and present you with a case study, one which consists of a single session, the first of a series of weekly meetings.

The counselee, let us call her M, was a woman in her late twenties. In our first session, M told me that she had recently broken up with her boyfriend H. She could not understand why she had felt compelled to leave him, especially since he was, so she told me, a good, considerate and successful person. Since she had terminated her previous relationships in a similar manner, she was worried that she was incapable of long-term relationships and marriage.

The immediate reason for which she had broken up with him, she explained, was his "pessimism": He lacked joy, was not very much interested in social encounters and in going out to have fun. He was too pre-meditative and calculating, and seemed to lack enough energy to be spontaneous and to do exciting things. She, on the other hand, so she said, is an "optimistic"

person. She likes to enjoy herself, to experience new things, to have fun. She always does only what she feels like doing at the moment.

Up until now, M had been telling me of her predicament. It is here that the conversation took a philosophical turn, when I raised a philosophical issue concerning a presupposition which she had been taking for granted. Notice that since the counselee is usually not a philosopher, it is important not to rush in posing the issue and answering it, but rather to devote some time to its gradual formulation and clarification, and to the examination of its relevance to the person's life.

"It is interesting," I said to her, "that in describing the differences between you and H, you have been focusing on one specific dimension of life, namely, enjoyable qualities of the present moment: fun, joy, excitement, surprise, being interested. Presumably, you have the capacity for these qualities and he doesn't."

She agreed with confidence. After a few moments I asked her: "Is it possible that his 'pessimism' is not a lack of something—a lack of energy to pursue the good qualities of life—but rather an interest in other qualities, ones that are not necessarily 'fun' or 'exciting'?"

Her reaction made it clear that the question opened for her a new perspective she had never thought about before; which is precisely what makes a philosophically significant moment: She had been taking it for granted that enjoyment is what life is all about. With my help, she could now examine the difference between her "optimism" and his "pessimism" from a novel perspective: These two can be seen as expressing two different attitudes to life. In other words, her "optimism" and his "pessimism" may be understood as two different answers to the question: What are the meaningful qualities in life? It was this philosophical issue which concerned us the rest of this session.

At this point, after the issue had been formulated, an additional step was necessary, one that is crucial in philosophical counseling. The counselee, as a person untrained in philosophical thought, usually has very little to say by way of answering a philosophical question. I, as a philosophical counselor, cannot answer the question for the counselee, but I must supply "raw materials"—possible distinctions, concepts, assumptions, lines of thought, etc.—which the counselee can use (develop, modify, reject, etc.) in her own way. Only so can the counselee go

beyond hackneyed slogans into new perspectives and realms of existence. This must be done, however, with great sensitivity so as not to lecture or impose theories.

And so, after she pondered the issue for a while and asked me to elaborate on it, I decided to illustrate it through the views of the Danish existentialist Kierkegaard. I told M about Kierkegaard's distinction between three different attitudes of a person to his life: the aesthetic (or sensual) attitude, in which the person's main dimension of meaning is that of the enjoyable versus the boring, and hence is an attitude that focuses on the present moment and constantly searches for new stimuli; second, the ethical attitude, in which the person finds meaning in following universal ethical laws i.e., "shoulds"; and third, the religious attitude, in which the person finds meaning in submission to the Absolute.

It was obvious that M was deeply touched. She exclaimed that she fits precisely the description of the aesthetic person who finds meaning in present enjoyment, while H is the ethical person. She explained that for H the important thing is to do what is right, and described several incidents as illustrations. I regarded with caution her enthusiasm with Kierkegaard's views. It is always dangerous, in counseling situations, to mention a philosopher's theory for fear that it would be accepted uncritically. Although good philosophers present us with a rich network of ideas thus illustrating how philosophical ideas can be developed, the danger is that the counselee might take the philosophical theory as an authority and adopt it indiscriminately. One way to avoid this danger is to go beyond this theory and introduce alternative views.

And so, at my suggestion, we started to explore the network of concepts underlying Kierkegaard's three attitudes to meaning in life—but we also considered additional possible attitudes. Keeping the conversation intimately related to M's concrete life and experiences, we compared the various attitudes and saw that each one of them has its own internal logic: some attitudes to meaning are directed, by their very essence, towards the future, while others find meaning in the present moment; some of them place value on the individual's own well-being, while others place value on things that lie outside the individual; some are concerned with other people's perspectives, while some find other people as irrelevant, and so on.

As we unfolded the inner structure and implications of the various approaches to meaning in life, M remarked: "Only now do I realize that my life chose a specific path that is only one among

many others. It never occurred to me to regard H as a person with a different perspective on life. I always regarded him as being like myself—only as incapable of reaching those qualities that are important."

Towards the end of the session she said: "It suddenly strikes me why my relationships with H did not work out. Each one of us found different things meaningful."

A bit later she said: "You know, whenever I did something to please him I felt that I was making concessions to him. But I now realize—and this is truly amazing—that when he was doing something for my sake, he was not making concessions at all. For him, pleasing me was not a concession but something he found meaningful in its own right. I, on the other hand, was focused on my own pleasure. It never occurred to me that my attitude was not everybody's. I took him to be a weakling, someone with no power to enjoy himself. In fact, he was finding meaning where I had never suspected."

In subsequent sessions, we developed these insights into deeper philosophical understandings, tied them more intimately to her experiences and life, and related them to other relevant philosophical issues. As my earlier comments should suggest, we did not end our counseling sessions with a finished conclusion, a unified theory, a statement, but rather with a rich network of perspectives and ideas that marked a territory extending mainly beyond her initial stance. The point of the counseling was not to summarize her life through an inevitably one-sided picture. Nor was it to "solve" her problem, but rather to go beyond it, towards broader perspectives on her actual and possible ways of being, thus enriching her philosophical self-understanding, as well as her capacity to deal with her life.

This counselee happened to be part of an outcome study which I conducted at the time. Let me finish by quoting from her post-counseling questionnaire her description of the nature of philosophical counseling sessions as she understood them:

"These are sessions which broaden the worldview of the 'self' and raise to consciousness various attitudes towards life. By means of the conversations it is possible to examine and come to know different conceptions of life. This is extremely enriching, and enables one to be conscious and critical of the way one lives.

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